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22 April 1966

NEGOTIATIONS ON VIETNAM, 1954-1966

By

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USAWC RESEARCH ELEMENT
(Essay)

Negotiations on Vietnam, 1954-1966

by

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22 April 1966

SUMMARY

The political problem which exists today in Vietnam is the same problem which the Geneva Accords of 1954 attempted to solve, but did not. The basic issue was then, and is now, whether or not Vietnam is to come under Communist domination.

The four elements of the Geneva Accords were the Viet-Minh-French armistice, the joint declaration of the participating nations and the unilateral position statements by South Vietnam and the United States. These documents clearly reflect the divergence of opinion on such a basic issue as the mechanics of unification of Vietnam.

The Communist Viet-Minh are sometimes credited with benevolence in a situation where they might have made greater demands. Their restraint was not engendered by kindly feelings but by fear of US intervention if their demands were too unreasonable.

Discussions on negotiations today rarely address themselves to negotiable issues. There are in fact no such issues, unless one side or the other curtails or postpones its objectives.

Negotiations must lead to victory for our side or for the Communist side. A victory for one is a defeat for the other. Our willingness to negotiate implies a readiness to accept defeat, whether it be partial or total.

The United States can dictate the terms of negotiations if it so desires. It has the means to carry out its objectives. The determinant is the national will which we are able to mobilize in support of our Asian objectives. If that national will is properly mobilized and employed, the Communists will ultimately be the side asking for negotiations. Such negotiations must accommodate US objectives.

During the past year no subject has been more aired in the public news media and in private conversations than US involvement in Vietnam. Much of the discussion has centered on US objectives and the merits of negotiations from the US viewpoint. Despite this attention, the US position on negotiations concerning Vietnam is as misunderstood and misinterpreted as has been the US participation and obligations with respect to that part of the Geneva Convention of 1954 which relates to Vietnam.

The results of the Geneva Accords of 1954 and the current negotiations are, of course, closely related, if for no other reason than the fact that the central issue has not changed. This central issue is whether or not all of Vietnam is to come under Communist domination. This does not infer that French objectives in 1954 and US objectives today are identical. For France, the objective was continued domination of Indochina; for the United States, it is a free people in South Vietnam.

It is my intent to present and clarify the most pertinent features of the 1954 Accords, to comment briefly on their impact on subsequent events, and finally to discuss current proposals for negotiations.

NEGOTIATIONS, POWER, AND WILL

To understand the nature and purpose of negotiations, their role in international politics must be examined. Both the military classics and modern military analysts wisely conclude that

negotiations following hostilities are, in the main, a recapitulation or a balance sheet which reflects or **sums** up the results of hostile action.

Often negotiations between nations take place without actually getting involved in war. In this case, a summing up of the results of action is not possible. Negotiators must then be equipped to estimate accurately how well their side would fare, should hostilities ensue. If negotiations bear fruit, they will tend to reflect the relative power position of opponents, though there has not been a physical test of power. If the negotiations are unsuccessful, and war ensues, it indicates that one of the participants, if rational, failed to properly evaluate the power position of the other; for only one of the participants can be a "victor."

Negotiations in the midst of war fall somewhere between the situation of prewar and postwar negotiations. Power has been partially tested, but no decision has been reached.

Negotiations between nations are essentially a comparison of relative power. On this basis, it should follow that wars are always completely irrational from the standpoint of the party which is destined to lose. The side having superior means is usually quite determinable beforehand. But to equate power and means is a serious mistake. Means includes manpower, materiel, resources, leadership; power includes all these, plus national will to employ available means in support of objectives.

Clausewitz considered power to be the product of means and strength of will.

The maneuver room of a negotiating nation is highly dependent not only on the national will of its adversary, but also on its own will to employ all means necessary to achieve its objectives. Means at the disposal of an adversary are subject to analysis and evaluation; will is not so easily subjected to the same kind of analysis and evaluation.

In war, as in a physical contest, the side with the greatest means is not always victorious. Witness the case of competing athletes where sheer desire has overcome a great disadvantage in skill or strength. The air battle over Britain during World War II exemplified the contribution which can be made by will to military power in war.

Likewise, the victor in negotiations is not always the side with the most just cause, or with the greatest means. Power, including will, is as critical to the outcome of negotiations as it is to the outcome of war. A nation which fully mobilizes both means and will in support of its objectives may overcome an inherently stronger nation which fails to fully mobilize in like manner. In 1938, at Munich, negotiations between Germany, Italy, France, and Great Britain dismembered Czechoslovakia. It was a disparity of will favoring the Axis Powers, not a substantial difference in means, which permitted Germany to achieve her objectives in these negotiations.

THE GENEVA ACCORDS--1954

So it was with regard to Vietnam in 1954. France, a nation of forty million industrially advanced people, was supported in the Indochina War by the United States, the most powerful nation on earth. France found it desirable to ask for peace--essentially on the terms of an opponent of fifteen millions who could claim no industrially developed economy, no modern trained army, no navy, no air force, and, in fact, not even existence as a nation. Seldom in war has such an imbalance of means resulted in a victory for the weaker participant.

The Geneva Accords of 1954 consisted of four major elements: an armistice involving France and the Viet-Minh, a joint declaration by the other participants (excluding the United States and South Vietnam), and unilateral statements of position by both the United States and South Vietnam.

The armistice divided Vietnam into Communist North Vietnam, north of the seventeenth parallel, and the free nation of South Vietnam, south of the parallel. Jointly signed by the French and Viet-Minh on 20 July 1954, the armistice had one other important result: it brought an end to the Indochina War.

Other participants at the conference were Laos, Cambodia, the state of Vietnam (South Vietnam), the People's Republic of China, the USSR, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This group of nations (less the United States and South Vietnam) made a joint declaration on the day after the signing of the

armistice which elaborated on certain of its provisions. Most important was a call for elections in July 1956 which would unify all of Vietnam under a single government.

South Vietnam specifically took exception to provisions for internal elections under conditions not agreed to by the South Vietnamese representatives. It has often been stated or implied that South Vietnam later reneged on a promise to hold elections in 1956. South Vietnam never made such a promise, or subscribed to such an agreement.

The United States supported the South Vietnamese protest, and their proposal that free elections under UN supervision be used to unify Vietnam. Neither nation has wavered from that fundamental position. The United States also declared that it would refrain from the threat or the use of force to disturb either the armistice agreements or the provisions of the joint declaration, but added that it would "view any renewal of the aggression in violation of the aforesaid agreements with grave concern and as seriously threatening international peace and security."¹

Despite this clear position of the United States and South Vietnam, even friendly writers and statesmen have succumbed to the Hitler oft-repeated-lie tactic, and have accepted as fact that the United States and South Vietnam reneged on an agreement made in

¹Peter V. Curl, Documents on American Foreign Relations, 1954, p. 316.

1954. Likewise, there has been wonderment because the Viet-Minh did not ask for greater concessions from the French. Why did not the Viet-Minh demand that all Vietnam be unified under the government of Ho Chi Minh? Was their failure to demand unification a sign of benevolence and good will toward the French? It has often been implied that it was.

The terms of the agreement which permitted the French to extricate themselves from a most difficult, costly, and embarrassing plight did appear generous in consideration of the military situation. Before drawing conclusions about Viet-Minh generosity, however, motivation should be more carefully examined. In light of subsequent events, it appears certain that the Communist Viet-Minh designs on South Vietnam had not been diluted in the slightest. Concessions that were made in 1954 were made in recognition of the practicalities of the whole situation at that time. The Viet-Minh were well aware that the full power available to their adversaries (including the United States) had not been brought to bear. Had they made the stakes high enough, the Viet-Minh might have induced the United States to mobilize greater means against them. This recognition, rather than generosity, motivated them to accept the division of Vietnam at the seventeenth parallel, an agreement which legalized a Communist government in North Vietnam, and merely postponed, in the Viet-Minh view, the time when such a government could prevail in the South.

Thus, the series of events in mid-July of 1954 that have been termed the Geneva Accords were anything but accords. Though they succeeded in bringing a temporary cessation to open hostilities, they did not resolve the issues. They saved a little face for France and eventually permitted France to extricate itself almost completely from Indochina. The United States, South Vietnam, and the Viet-Minh were equally unprepared to seek a more complete solution in 1954. Certainly there was no agreement among the interested parties on the future course of events.

The previous April, President Eisenhower had written to Prime Minister Churchill:

But our painstaking search for a way out of the impasse has reluctantly forced us to the conclusion that there is no negotiated solution of the Indochina problem which in its essence would not be either a face-saving device to cover a French surrender or a face-saving device to cover a Communist retirement.
. . . .

Nothing had occurred when the negotiations took place in July to alter the situation which President Eisenhower had so aptly described. The temporizing solution under the umbrella of US power had prevented a complete surrender. In South Vietnam no decision was reached; in North Vietnam the solution was painfully akin to Munich, 1938.

AFTER GENEVA

There was relatively little activity on the part of the Communist insurgents (Viet-Minh) between 1954 and 1956. Though

the United States and South Vietnam had been explicit in their insistence on supervised free elections, the leaders of the newly created North Vietnam were gambling the Communist controlled elections could still be held. Such elections, if successful, could bring the whole of Vietnam under Communist control. In the event the elections were not successful, the instruments of terror, insurgency, and infiltration were still available to help achieve their objectives. South Vietnamese and US leaders were not so naive as to subscribe to unsupervised, Communist controlled elections. Once this resolve became clear to the Communists, they reverted to the same terror tactics which had been used so effectively against the French.

Each year since 1956 has witnessed an increase in activity by the Viet-Minh (Viet Cong).² Each year has seen an increased effort on the part of the United States to support a South Vietnamese government which is determined to resist the Viet Cong. By 1965 the threat from the Viet Cong insurgents, added to the threat posed by a possible invasion by North Vietnamese regular forces, had become so acute that a decision was made to introduce US military units.

Once again it became apparent that the Geneva Accords had never been more than an armistice--a temporary cessation of hostilities. The Communist objective of complete domination of

²The insurgents in South Vietnam are today known as the Viet Cong. The insurgents during the Indochina War were known as the Viet-Minh.

Vietnam was once again in direct confrontation with the United States-South Vietnamese objective of preventing this domination.

NEGOTIATIONS, 1965-1966

Since the introduction of US military units in early 1965 the desirability of negotiations on Vietnam has been much discussed. Immensely more talk has been devoted to the desirability of negotiations than to the issues which would be subject to bargaining. Woolly minds lump negotiations, discussions, peace-talks, cease-fires, and armistices as if they were one and the same.

The United States has taken the public position that it stands ready for unconditional discussions, but has declared that South Vietnam must remain free from outside interference; that we desire no US bases there; that we support the Geneva agreements.

North Vietnam has made four major points which it contends are consistent with the Geneva agreements. These points are:

1. Withdrawal of all US forces.
2. No military alliances for North or South Vietnam.
3. No foreign interference with the internal affairs of South Vietnam. Their affairs must be settled according to the program of the NLFSV (National Liberation Front of South Vietnam).
4. Peaceful reunification of Vietnam.

Regardless of how diplomatic language is embellished, or what is said by either party for consumption of the world press,

the fundamental issue is still whether South Vietnam is to remain free or is to become Communist. The North Vietnamese demand for settling the situation according to the NLFSV means Communist control; the US demand for freedom from outside interference is specifically aimed at averting a Communist-dominated state.

Regardless of who negotiates on the Communist side--the USSR, the People's Republic of China, North Vietnam, or the NLFSV--this same issue will be at stake. A victory for the Communist side must be a defeat for the United States and vice versa. The impasse which President Eisenhower once described has not withered and faded. It has become more sharply focused than ever before. No one is more obviously aware of and vitally concerned with the alternatives in a settlement than the government in Saigon. A settlement which is not a victory must be a defeat, or another postponement of decision.

Even a willingness to negotiate implies a readiness to accept defeat. Many years ago Clausewitz stated that a belligerent has only three reasons for wishing to terminate hostilities. He may be reduced to military impotence; his chances of military success may have become less likely than before; or he may have to pay a higher price than he had originally assumed.

Do any of these conditions apply to the United States today? Certainly the first does not, for no one could suggest that we have been reduced to military impotence. The full capability of our available military power has not been brought to bear.

Is military success less likely than at some time in the past? The introduction of elite US military forces must certainly have enhanced the possibilities for military success. If it has not, our whole scale of military values is useless, and we are truly a paper tiger, as Mao Tse-tung has so often declared.

Must we now pay a higher price for military victory than we had once assumed? Here the answer is obviously in the affirmative. In 1963 public statements by prominent US government officials forecast a successful conclusion of the Vietnam conflict by the next year. Yet we have been forced to increase our military advice and assistance and have recently committed substantial numbers of American forces to the struggle.

Thus our readiness to negotiate today, which implies a readiness to cease hostilities, must be a result of our own feeling that a higher price may be exacted than once was assumed to be adequate. Herein lies the controversy that has arisen during the last few months. Support for Vietnam policy--an essentially unchanged policy for over eleven years--was easy when the price was low. As the price is increased, the policy becomes more difficult to support. The objective--the containment of communism--is as valid today as it was two, five, or ten years ago. Today, though, there is evidence of considerably more opposition to a course of action that may exact a greater military effort.

Negotiations cannot and will not attain objectives which we are either unable or unwilling to attain on the battlefield.

If our objective remains unchanged, then discussions concerning negotiations convey an impression that we might settle for less than we have been demanding. If, on the other hand, our objectives have actually been watered down and revised, then negotiations with our adversaries are in order. There is no point in continued military support for a nonexistent political objective. It follows that our political and military thinking must adjust itself to the reality of Chinese predominance on the Asian mainland.

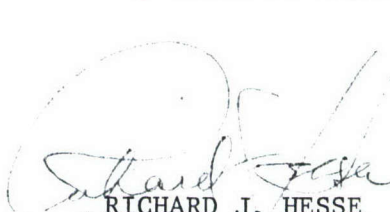
The latter course is reminiscent of the man who makes the down payment on an automobile and then decides he didn't really need it in the first place. It does not follow that he could not make the payments; it only indicates that he was unwilling to do so. In 1950, President Truman, supported by the United Nations, made the down payment on a courageous Asian policy on the Korean Peninsula. Our investments in Vietnam in materiel, money and especially in men represent a series of subsequent installments. Let not history erroneously record that we lacked the ability to meet the final installments, nor add to the myth that victory in a land war in Asia is not possible. The means to fight and win such a war are available, if it becomes necessary. The will to conduct it is another matter.

History is replete with turning points where a people's resolve or lack of it guided the course of events for many years into the future. Such was the case at Munich in 1938; Korea in

1950; Geneva in 1954; and Cuba in 1962. Today we are again at such a point and Americans would do well to reflect deeply on our objectives as they pertain to us and to posterity. Our national objectives must guide our military policy and strategy in peace and in war--and in negotiations.

Once objectives have been resolved and crystallized, whether we attain them through war or through negotiations is not a matter for hawks or doves to decide. It is primarily a matter for the enemy to contemplate. His decision can be made easy if it becomes clear that our means to wage war are equalled by our will to do it, in the event of necessity.

If we are dealing with an irrational enemy, then enemy actions will not be greatly affected by our power posture. But if he is rational, then our power posture will be a governing factor in his decisions and in his actions. If that posture is one of demonstrated means and will, of capability and readiness, one in which there are neither hawks nor doves, then the only rational action for him is to seek negotiations. He will do this with the realization that such a course of action is preferable to war, is in his best interests, and that US objectives must be accommodated. This should be the pattern of Vietnamese negotiations in 1966.


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